Gold foil figures in focus

A Scandinavian find group and related objects and images from ancient and medieval Europe

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A Scandinavian find group and related objects and images from ancient and medieval Europe

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Advanced studies in ancient iconography I

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Framing matters

Charlotte Behr, London

Keywords: Frame, boundary, portal, architectural surround, visual space, deity, ritual performance

Abstract: Many representations of gold foil figures are surrounded by frames that were integral parts of the dies with which they had been stamped. In this paper, I shall argue that this feature impacted meaning and significance of the images that it encircled but also affected the experience of seeing the images by the viewers. A significant proportion of the gold foil figures, however, were not framed and the absence of any boundaries on those foils too is relevant for the interpretation of their images. Theoretical approaches that were developed on the basis of framing devices in ancient art as well as a discussion of some examples in early medieval art provide concepts and analogies for the analysis of frames on the gold foils.

In the concerted attempt during the Gold Foil Figures workshop to identify possible models for the images of the gold foils and to find contemporary parallels or analogous representations from a wide geographical area including not only Scandinavia but also the Mediterranean world, Continental Europe and the British Isles, my task was a consideration of illuminated early Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. It is highly improbable that these contemporary or near-contemporary works of art were known to the craftspeople who made the gold foils or *vice versa* that the monks who created the manuscripts would have ever seen a gold foil (Neuman de Vegvar 2011, 182). Still, it is possible to discuss some aspects of the illuminations as analogous to the gold foil images because they were derived from similar contemporary conventions of viewing figurative images despite their very different artistic, religious, and social contexts.

Among the noticeable aspects of the manuscript illuminations are the elaborate and often sophisticated frames that surround scenic and figurative images but also the canon tables that typically preceded the texts of the gospels. As many of the gold foil figures were shown in 'accentuated framing' (Mannering 2017, 17), this particular iconographic feature will be the focus of this chapter in which I shall argue that the margins of the gold foils were not marginal but impacted the image and affected the experience of the viewers. A discussion of the frames that encircle the gold foil figures within a broader context of functions and roles of frames on ancient, Byzantine, and contemporary early medieval artwork can contribute to the understanding of the significance of the gold foil images and the ways they may have been perceived.

Gold foil figures ("Guldgubber") are characterised by their precious material, tiny size, and long series of die-identical or iconographically and stylistically closely related images of either a single or a couple of anthropomorphic and a small number of zoomorphic figures. Found in at least 40 places between northern Norway, southern Denmark, eastern Sweden, and the Baltic islands, they appear remarkably homogeneous (Watt 2004; Mannering 2017). Most of the foils are very thin and fragile

which renders them unfit for any more permanent practical uses. Only very few of them have any signs of attachments (Lamm 2004, 120; Watt 2009, 52). Considering their smallness, many of the images are exceptionally detailed, whilst others are quite simple. Most gold foils were stamped with a die, but some single figures and all the animals were cut out and occasionally decorated with some incisions purveying further details (Watt 2009, 46).

Numerous studies have focused on the iconography of the anthropomorphic figures, on their identification as male or female figures, on the description of their outfits and dress accessories or their nakedness, hairstyles, jewellery, their postures, gestures, the attributes that they are holding in their hands, and the forms of interactions (Watt 1992; 2009; Lamm 2004; Helmbrecht 2011, 261–63; Mannering 2017). The interpretations of the images are based on these iconographic details, but also on later written sources that recorded names of Norse deities and mythical beings and their attributes and deeds. The find contexts of the gold foils suggest ritual activities (Lamm 2004; Sundqvist 2016, 408–412). These observations about their ritual usages informed the mythological readings of the single figures and the couples, and *vice versa,* their identification as old Norse divinities or supernatural creatures underpinned the understanding of their ceremonial or religious appropriation (Sundqvist 2016, 408; Mannering 2017, 23).

The discussions have first concentrated on the representations of the couples. Magnus Olsen in 1909 linked them to the old Norse myth of the god Freyr who courted the giantess Gerðr as the story was told in the Eddic poem *Skirnismál*. He proposed that the foils belonged to an agrarian fertility cult (Olsen 1909). Gro Steinsland too concluded that the couples show the wedding of the mythical figures Freyr and Gerðr but represented also on a different level the *hieros gamos,* the sacred union of the divine and the mortals. As the Swedish ruling Ynglinga family claimed descent from the son of Freyr, the myth served as their dynastic legitimisation (Steinsland 1991).

With the recent, far more detailed archaeological observations of the find contexts that showed that the gold foils were frequently related to hall buildings in central places or elite settlements, they are now described as house offerings or votive deposits but also as temple money or identification badges during religious festivals (Watt 1992, 224; 2004; Baastrup 2015; Mannering 2017, 28). In connection with his exploration of these ceremonial houses or halls and the presumed high seats in them, Olof Sundqvist discussed the physical and ideological associations of the gold foils with these buildings. He too argued for a close link between religion and the ideology of rulership in pre-Christian Scandinavia and suggested that the gold foil images displayed 'very close genealogical relation which existed between the mythical world and the high-ranking ruling families in the Mälaren area and Trøndelag' (Sundqvist 2016, 408).

In his comprehensive presentation of the Swedish gold foil finds, Jan Peder Lamm considered an alternative interpretation of the gold foil figures. He suggested the possibility that the 'disproportionate size and almost grotesque stylisation of the heads' may depict masks that were worn during religious ceremonies which were shown on the foils (Lamm 2004, 46–47; Back Danielsson 2002). But be they representations of disguised participants in ritual performances that were possibly connected with shamanistic allusions or of mythical deities, Lamm concluded that either way the significance of the gold foil iconography was religious (Lamm 2004, 130).

In her first detailed publication of the then newly discovered, more than 2300 gold foils from Sorte Muld in 1992, of which the vast majority shows single male and female figures, Margrethe Watt proposed four criteria to group these figures according to their different features in each category. She selected postures, costumes, attributes, and frames and distinguished two groups (Watt 1992). One group – which she named 'princely group' – included males and females who are characterised as standing, dressed in so-called ceremonial outfits, and depicted without any particular hand gestures. Several of the male ones are equipped with attributes including rings, diadems, staffs, cups, or swords, whereas some of the female ones wear jewellery or hold drinking horns (Watt 1992). The

figures on the foils in the second group, which Watt called the 'dancing group', were shown in motion, often on tiptoes with straightened or bent legs. They tend to have ostentatious hand gestures. Some of them are probably pictured naked. Occasionally belts and neck rings are their attributes. Several have gold strips wound round their necks like neck rings, others around the waist like belts (Watt 1992; cf. Watt in this vol.).

Watt identified the frequent representation of a male single standing figure that holds a staff as a depiction of Odin, the king of the gods, whilst some of the other images may be Freyr (Watt 2009, 52). Karl Hauck asserted that all the double figure foils show the same couple in a marriage scene but identified them as Freyr with Freyja as bride. Among the single figure foils from Sorte Muld he recognised again Freyr and Freyja but also the gods Odin and Thor, as they are characterised by their different attributes (Hauck 1993; 1994; cf. Oehrl in this vol.). The female single figures with drinking horns have also been compared to the valkyries on the Gotlandic picture-stones who offered drinks to the fallen warriors (Lamm 2004, 118; Watt 2004, 213).

A different approach to the attempts of identifying the representations and the ritual functions of the gold foils took Ing-Marie Back Danielsson. She concentrated on the transformative processes of the precious metal with which the foils had been made, including the melting of the gold, the creating of the foils, the stamping and incising them. As gold was perceived as a divine material, the objects were imbued with a particular divine or magical quality (Back Danielsson 2013). She argued against the interpretation of the foils as just representing deities but stressed their 'visual potency' that affected the viewers who experienced them as living and active objects (Back Danielsson 2007, 240–241; 2013, 334). The human figures on the gold foils thus demanded the person who held and saw them to react to them, to act in certain ways as evoked by the images (Back Danielsson 2013, 336).

So far, the focus of the discussions has been predominantly on the figurative elements of the images, whereas the margins of the gold foils are rarely mentioned or discussed. However, both the framing and also the absence of framing were meaningful decisions. As integral parts of the design, the frames provided a boundary that confined the visual space for some of the anthropomorphic figures, whilst others were seen without these demarcations. This observation raises questions about their role in relation to the images of the figures and equally about the possible significance of their absence on other foils and may provide additional clues for an understanding of the gold foil images.

Frames on the gold foils

The frames (see appendix) consisted either of a beaded edge or a simpler, unadorned ridge. They were either square or rectangular, and on some of the foils with single figures they were also vaulted (Fig. 1a–d).

Frames – as any iconographic feature – can provide typological and taxonomic details that sometimes allow regional allocations or chronological sequencing. However, apart from regional differences between simple ridges and beaded stripes, the different shapes of the frames on the gold foils do not appear to be of either regional or chronological significance or related to particular workshop traditions. The style of the frames differed between Swedish finds outside Uppåkra in Scania and Eketorp on Öland as they tend to be simple ridges, whereas the finds from Uppåkra, Eketorp, the Danish, and the Norwegian sites show usually beaded surrounds (Lamm 2004, 46).

The frames were always part of the dies with which the foils had been stamped and not added later like, for instance, beaded or braided gold wires that had been attached to the border of the gold bracteates (Axboe 2007, 25–26). Thus, they did not fulfil the practical function of reinforcing or protecting the edge of the foil.

Fig. 1. Different types of frames: rectangular, square and arched, beaded and unadorned. a Gold foil from Lundeborg, Funen, Denmark; b gold foil from Helgö, Uppland, Sweden; c gold foil from Sorte Muld, Bornholm, Denmark; d gold foil from Sorte Muld, Bornholm, Denmark (a photo John Lee, Nationalmuseet Copenhagen; b photo Gunnel Jansson, Historiska museet, Stockholm; c–d photos Bornholms Museum).

On the 14 patrices that were used for stamping the gold foils and were found so far in nine different find spots, the couples and single figures were surrounded with either a rectangular or an arched frame (Watt 2004; Lamm 2004, 105–107; Rundkvist 2007; Mannering 2017, 17). No patrix for gold foil figures without a frame has yet been discovered.

A review of the distribution of framed and unframed gold foils shows remarkable variety between different sites and some regional and iconographic trends but no exclusive correlations. This lack of consistency means that any conclusions drawn from detailed comparisons of the foils remain tentative.

On the majority of the stamped foils, including most but not all foils depicting couples, the figures were surrounded with pronounced frames. However, among the stamped single figure foils a sizeable number was not framed. The cut-out figures including the zoomorphic ones were never framed. In almost all of the find spots with more than a very small number of gold foil finds, framed and unframed foils were found together, and whilst the handling and ritual depositions of the foils varied in different sites, in any one site no differences between the types of foils, single or double, framed or unframed, have been observed. They belonged together.

Couples were nearly always surrounded by rectangular or square frames, whereas the frames of the single figures varied between rectangular and arched. The arches followed the shape of the figures' heads. Die-linked foils that have been found in different sites are always framed ones. Unframed figures seem not to have travelled.

The variability of framed and unframed foils in the find assemblages of the different sites where they have been discovered may point to distinct local ritual and mythical traditions within the broader framework of a common meaning and function of the foils over wide areas of Scandinavia.

A poignant example for this assumed local ritual diversity are observations from the two find assemblages in Sorte Muld and Uppåkra. They are iconographically closely related, not only through die-linked foils but also through a similar composition of predominantly single male figure foils. However, the foils from Sorte Muld were frequently deliberately folded or rolled around small pieces of gold, whereas there are no traces of folded or rolled foils in Uppåkra (Watt 1992, 224; 2004, 170).

Margrethe Watt observed that the foils of her 'princely group' were framed, whereas those of her 'dancing group' were unframed (Watt 1992, 217). This distinction based on the large collection of gold foils from Bornholm seems to be mostly applicable to single figure foils that have been found outside Bornholm as well. Unframed are, for example, the seven die-identical male figures from Eke-

torp, Öland (Fig. 2), that were depicted on tiptoe and appear to be wearing a knee-length fur-like dress, or the three cut-out, probably die-identical male figures from Ravlunda, Scania that are shown walking or dancing (Lamm 2004, 95–96). Then again, depicted in arched frames are, for example, the two identical male figures probably shown seated that were found in Bolmsö, Småland (Fig. 3) or the also probably seated six identical female figures from Eketorp (Lamm 2004, 102–104).

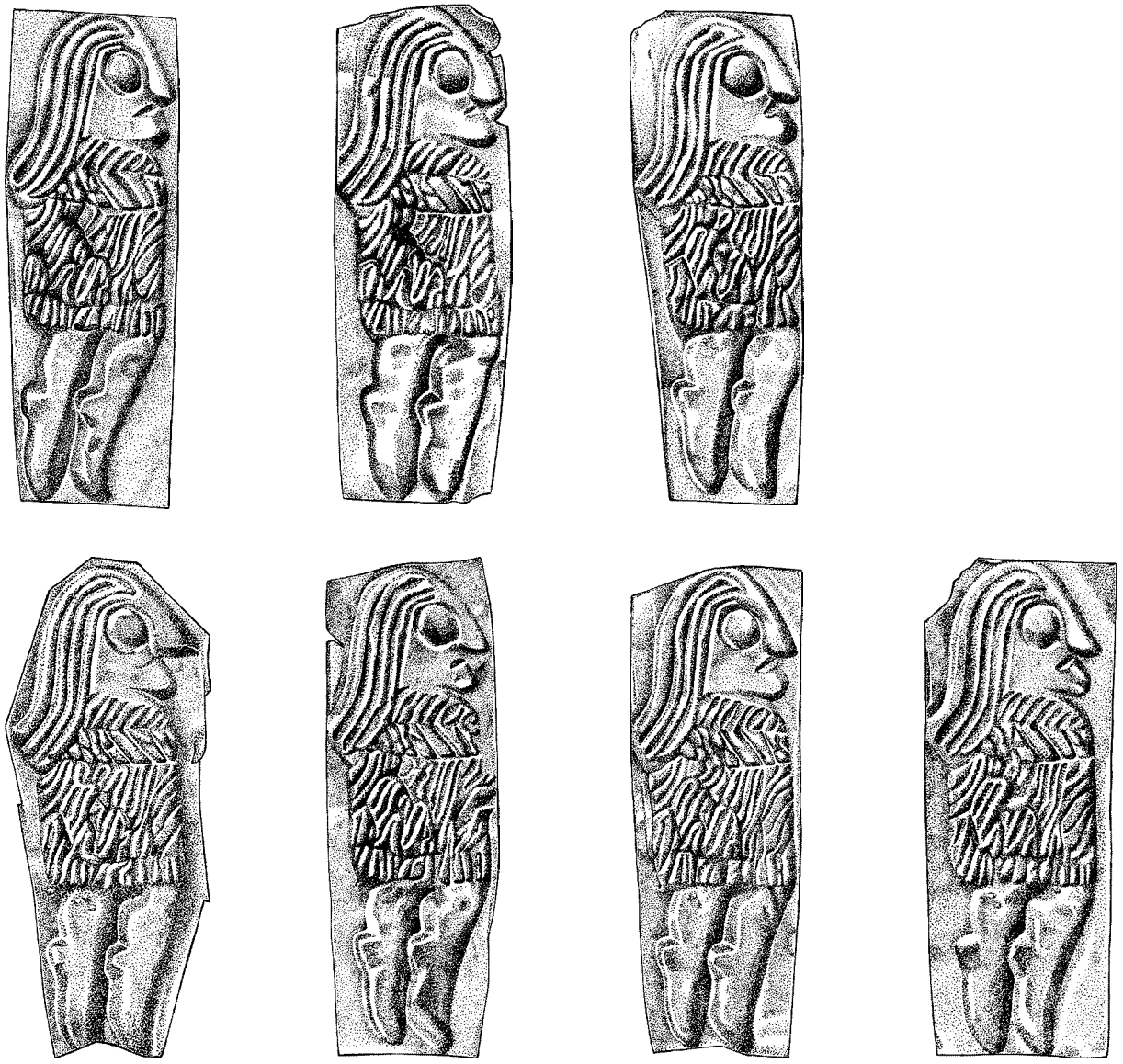

Fig. 2. Seven die-identical gold foils from Eketorp, Öland, Sweden (after Lamm 2004, 99–102).

In her assessment of the foils, Watt concluded that the unframed and cut-out foils were generally of a lower quality than the framed ones (Watt 1992, 217). However, whilst the richness of iconographical detail certainly varied between foils, it is possible to find among both groups more or less elaborate examples. Watt also suggested that the frames may have emphasised the elevated position of the figures in her 'princely group' that she interpreted as deities (Watt 1992, 217). Thus, the framing was not merely of ornamental significance, because the arched shape of a series of single figure foils formed a kind of portal over the figures (Watt 1992, 208). A similar idea was expressed by Henrietta Lindgren who interpreted the curved frames as arches and described them as *fastigia* or gables, sym-

Fig. 3. Gold foil from Bolmsö, Småland, Sweden (photo Gunnel Jansson, Historiska museet, Stockholm).

bols of authority and dignity in Greek and Roman art. Philosophers, later Christian saints, and the evangelists were shown under arches (Lindgren 2011, 10–11).

Karl Hauck saw the framed gold foil figures within a long tradition going back to Roman votive plaques. Their use had been adopted in provincial Roman sanctuaries. They were much larger and usually made in silver but also stamped with patrices and showed Roman or local provincial deities standing in a portal between columns with capitals supporting a triangular decorated tympanon signifying the deity's temple. Usually, an inscription was added in which the god was addressed by name (Hauck 1993, 413–416). On later Roman votive plaques, as Hauck has demonstrated with examples from the province of Britannia, the architectural frame was simplified into an arched beaded or ribbed frame (Hauck 1993, 415–417; see Oehrl in this vol., Fig. 17). Even if it was possible to argue that the gold foils were derived over time and space from the much earlier Roman votive foils, the question remains how the framing of the figures was perceived by the viewers of the 6th and 7th centuries. So far, no Roman votive plaque has ever been discovered in Scandinavia.

The idea of the portal was taken up in 2002 by Ing-Marie Back Danielsson in her discussion of the gold foils. She argued that the gold foil figures were depicted whilst they were engaged in different stages of shamanistic acts or performances. According to her argument, 'the clothed, framed gold foil "man" or "woman" could well be the same humanoid seen on another unframed or carved or cut gold foil but in a different stage of the same act or performance'. Portals were 'perhaps signifying that they are just about to enter the travel to other worlds. … Others framed or in portals drink from horns, perhaps shown consuming sacred drinks/drugs to realise the cosmic journeying' (Back Danielsson 2002, 186). The frames are here seen as architectural props that represented a liminal space during the staging of ritual acts.

Lotte Hedeager too interpreted the frames that encircle the gold foil figures as portals, although in mythical contexts. In her study *Iron Age Myth and Materiality,* she explored aspects of Norse mythology as they were expressed both in contemporary material and iconographical evidence in Migration, Vendel, and Viking Periods, and in the later written sources. She focused on the constitution of otherness, the transgression of boundaries between animals and humans, and human transformations. In her interpretation, the single gold foil figures were standing on the doorstep to encounter and welcome someone, whilst the couples were meeting each other. In this scene the 'doorway has a significant connotation related to death and transformation', and the figures were 'metaphorically in a stage of transformation' (Hedeager 2011, 131). She supported her argument with the observation that the figures that were dressed in male garments lacked any male attributes but were equipped with attributes commonly associated with women, the staff and the cup. That is why Hedeager interpreted them as attaining a 'special category of socio-sexual identity or a "third gender"' (Hedeager 2011, 131). She continued the theme of transformation by interpreting the single figures on the cut-out foils that appear unclothed, without gender-specific attributes, or dressed in what looks like furs as being in a 'stage of liminality: between life and dead, or man and animal, or man and woman' (Hedeager 2011, 132).

The majority of the frames on the gold foils are square or rectangular. Still, the focus of the discussions so far has been on the arched frames of the single figures. According to the different interpretations, the framing devices were either a portal signifying enhancement by using this architectural feature or a door or entrance to another world depicting metaphorically a liminal zone or an image of a requisite on a stage for ritual performances.

Observations derived from framing devices in ancient, Byzantine, and contemporary early medieval art suggest various uses of frames surrounding the figurative images well beyond aesthetic or practical considerations. The depicted figures and topics can usually be described more easily because they are either accompanied by inscriptions or can be related unambiguously to ancient or biblical texts.

In their recent *Cultural history* of frames in classical art, Verity Platt and Michael Squire proposed a theoretical framework in order to assess various functions of frames and explore the 'dynamic relationships between the frame's practical functions, aesthetic effects and cultural implications' (Platt/Squire 2017b, 9). These concepts provide useful models for the discussion of the early medieval framing devices, not least because frames in ancient art were also integral parts of the works of art unlike the removable frames of more recent pictures.

Frames in ancient art were not only a decorative element, but they impacted the images they surrounded by delineating the visual field. They not only confined the image but also mediate between the image and the world outside it. Frames can also enhance the image by contributing an additional layer of meaning to it. A variety of architectural frames was employed in ancient paintings and sculptures. They set the representation into a physical space but also contained it. By defining the limits of the representation, frames structure the visual experience and create an 'inside' and an 'outside' (Platt/Squire 2017b, 45). Through this demarcation of the space, frames affect the way the viewer experiences the image. They direct and guide the viewer's gaze and control the experience of the encounter with the image. Frames can create a boundary between the physical world of the viewer and the visual representation of the image, thus playing an active role in negotiating between the 'real' world and the 'fictional' world of the image (Platt/Squire 2017b, 47).

More specifically, Verity Platt explored different forms of architectural, visual, and material frames that surrounded religious images and argued that frames could 'acquire an additional theological dimension when they are employed to support, contain, indicate or explicate the divine' (Platt 2017, 384).

Through framing, a distinct area can be created in which the representations of deities were segregated and their distinct nature was emphasised. Placing the images of deities into a separate sphere enhanced the numinousness of the divine image (Platt 2017).

Reflecting on examples from Byzantium, Bente Kiilerich too argued that frames were part of the artwork, actively isolating the image from its environment and separating the outside world from the world of the image (Kiilerich 2001, 320–21). She distinguished between framed and unframed images in Byzantine art and made the point that the framed image was segregated from its surrounding and re-presented the subject, whereas the subject of the unframed image was present and in the real world (Kiilerich 2001, 322). Glenn Peers took these analyses of Byzantine art and its framing even further and postulated that it was the framing that made it possible to perceive divine presence by defining the representations as manufactured artefacts and mediating the viewers' responses to them (Peers 2004, 2).

Even taking into account that Byzantine art was created and experienced in a very different religious context to contemporary northern Europe and the topic of intense theological debates, these thoughts about the perceptions of framed and unframed images are worth noticing.

Two examples from Anglo-Saxon book illuminations that were near-contemporary with the gold foils can demonstrate the roles of frames in relation to the image but also to the viewer.

The famous Ezra page from the Codex Amiatinus (Cod. Amiat. 1, fol. 5r) is surrounded with a broad, multi-coloured frame that relates to the picture of the scribe Ezra through the use of the same colours (Fig. 4). The different-coloured strips provide additional depth to the image. Ezra is sitting and working surrounded by his writing utensils in front of an open cupboard. On its shelves are

Fig. 4. Portrait of Ezra the scribe. Codex Amiatinus fol. 5r (MS Amiatinus 1, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence).

nine volumes of the biblical texts as indicated by the inscriptions along the spines. Dated to the early 8th century, it is the oldest complete copy of the Bible, written and illuminated in the monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow in Northumbria. Style and topic of this page were derived from an Italian model, most probably from the monastery of Cassiodorus in Vivarium. In the discussion whether the scribe in Wearmouth-Jarrow copied a Cassiodorian exemplar precisely when he created this image, or adapted and transformed it, it is now argued that he created in fact something new (de Hamel 2017, 54–95).

As the picture was probably, before the Codex Amiatinus was rebound, the opening page of it, the image is self-referential.

In the centre of the image is not the scribe – as one might expect – but the open book cupboard. This *armarium* is protecting the precious volumes, it is encasing them, with its open doors it is inviting the reader/viewer towards the reading and contemplation of the holy texts. In a detailed iconographical study of the cupboard, Janina Ramirez analysed the decoration of base, lintel, and gable: the bird and the cross and the lozenges, urn, quadruped animal, star and another cross and then another cross, this time on some box flanked by two birds, most probably peacocks. She concluded her discussion that 'it is possible to discern an overall iconographical scheme centered on the individual's soul's journey towards salvation' (Ramirez 2009, 10). The cupboard that acted as a frame to the biblical books thus had its own message and through it enhanced the image of the books inside it with their message of salvation.

By framing the sacred books twice, first by the outer, multi-coloured frame and then by the cupboard, the gaze of the reader or viewer is guided through the room to the cupboard and then to the books, a journey that creates a dynamic approach towards them and intensifies the experience. The frames define the space of the image, the room, and the inside of the cupboard. Through their decoration, they contribute to the meaning of the image, but they also control the experience of the viewers who enter the image and contemplate its significance. As defining borders, they exert influence by steering the viewer's engagement with the image.

A second and very different example for a framing device in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts are the canon tables on folio 11 of the Lindisfarne Gospels (Fig. 5), dated around 700 (British Library Cotton MS Nero D IV; Brown 2003; Pulliam 2017). Canon tables typically preceded the texts of the gospels. They were first devised by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, around 330. He took advantage of the still fairly new format of the codex when he devised his lists. By using columns and arches to organise the canon tables, he followed the classical practice of framing tables in representative manuscripts (Klauser 1961). Canon tables are numerical lists of the sections into which the gospel texts had been divided. The lists operate as a concordance of the sections all four gospels or three or two of them share. They show the relationship between the gospels through numerical cross-referencing (Nordenfalk 1977).

Fig. 5. Second canon table. Lindisfarne Gospels fol. 11 (© The British Library Board, London, Cotton MS, Nero D. IV, fol 11v).

The three lists of the parallel passages on the second canon table on folio 11 were framed and divided by architectural elements, including four columns with bases and capitals and shafts that were decorated with interlaced animals. The columns were overarched with a similarly decorated arch. Small arches linked the individual columns and vaulted the names of three of the evangelists.

By numbering the sections and listing the numbers, Carl Nordenfalk argued that the 'Eusebian synopsis constituted a mathematical epitome of Christ's message of salvation, in somewhat the same way as the Christogram stood for the full name of Christ' (Nordenfalk 1982, 29). Michelle Brown explained the architectural design of the canon tables that were set at the beginning of the gospel texts as forming metaphorically the *atrium* or entrance through which the sacred texts were approached (Brown 2003, 304). Carol Neuman de Vegvar, however, argued that the very consistent features in these tables in the biblical manuscripts mean that they referred probably to a real building. According to her, the canon tables evoked the tomb of Christ in the Anastasis Rotunda with its colonnaded courtyard that was often represented, for example, on pilgrims' ampullae (Neuman de Vegvar 2007). If her interpretation is right, the framing devices that encased the gospel epitome communicated an additional level of significance. In the interpretations of late antique and early medieval theologians, the tomb of Christ became the new temple of Jerusalem that replaced the old temple. The gospels that tell the story of the new covenant were represented first in numerical abbreviation in the canon tables before the texts. At the same time, the architecture of the tables alluded to the tomb of Christ that signified the new temple (Neuman de Vegvar 2007, 254).

The columns and arches that framed visually the gospel texts guided the readers towards the texts and invited them into the book. But the framing architecture had also its own significance, alluding to the tomb of Christ and adding an extra dimension to the significance of the biblical message.

Iconography and framing of the early medieval manuscript illuminations are far more detailed than the tiny gold foils images. Still, the observation of the uses of framing devices – be they coloured strips or architectural features that communicated on the one hand with the image, enhancing and supporting its message, and on the other hand with the viewers by directing and controlling their engagement with the image – may provide analogies to the interpretation of the frames on the foils.

Frames also featured prominently on contemporary decorated metalwork from northern Europe. Iconographically, stylistically, and in terms of their find spots most closely related to the gold foil figures are the Scandinavian gold bracteates dated to the second half of the 5th and first half of the 6th century. These round pendants were also made of gold foil, although a thicker one than the one used for the gold foils, and stamped with matrices. A loop and gold wire along the edge of the foil were attached (Axboe 2007).

The number of different motifs on the bracteates (which ultimately were derived from the imperial head on Roman coins and medallions) was limited like on the gold foils, and several were repeated in long series. They included anthropomorphic heads and figures, sometimes together with various animals, additional symbols and inscriptions, and on one of the largest groups of bracteates, interlaced animals were depicted (Axboe 2007). Bracteates have been found predominantly in Scandinavia, frequently in hoards in or near the same elite settlements where the later gold foils have been discovered. However, they tend not to be related to the hall buildings (Hauck 1992b, 546–550; Axboe 2007, 113–115; Pesch 2011).

The main motifs of the bracteates have been interpreted as depicting deities that are known from Norse mythology, especially the god Odin/Woden, and their stories in abbreviated versions (Hauck 2011; Pesch 2017, 55–57). Like the figures on the gold foils, they made beings from a supernatural world visible and tangible.

On most bracteates, these central stamped images were framed. Apart from the attached framing gold wire, the central motif was surrounded with one or more concentric grooves, often also with a circle of beads that were part of the die. On the larger foils, the border zones were divided into one or more concentric bands that were decorated with sequences of different symbols that were stamped with individual dies, thus creating additional, more or less extensive framing (Axboe 2007, 25–26). These decorated rings surrounding the central image not only turned the bracteates into more splendidly adorned pendants but generated a greater distance to the figurative image, thus extending for the viewer the visual access to it, and heightened the experience of seeing the image of the deity (Fig. 6).

Only occasionally it is possible to suggest a link between the border decoration and the central image when, for example, sequences of small anthropomorphic heads in profile or *en face* were stamped in one of the border zones. These small heads in series can be found for instance on the C-bracteates from Gerete (IK 62,1; Fig. 7), Lyngby (IK 116) and Sandegård/Rønne (IK 324), or the B-bracteate from Vedby (IK 13,3). They may have served as a repetition of the head in the central image, possibly with the intention of reinforcing its presence and amuletic value.

Framing devices also occur frequently on objects that were adorned in animal styles. When Leslie Webster analysed artefacts decorated in early Anglo-Saxon animal styles, she argued that the reading of this intricate visual language – which was composed of complex, contorted, and abbreviated zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures – required knowledge of the underlying grammar of which the 'most immediately striking ground rule is the imposition of an elaborate framework within which the visual language is compartmentalized …' (Webster 2003, 14). The frames that divided the space into different zones had not only the practical function of controlling and ordering the various iconographic elements of the designs but also a symbolic meaning, 'a visual statement of order in the cosmos' (Webster 2003, 14). Webster discussed examples from Britain, but as they were derived from Scandinavian models, similar observations are possible on finds from Scandinavia.

Siv Kristoffersen discussed relief brooches, clasps, and other decorated metalwork from the 5th and 6th centuries that has been found in south-west Norway and is decorated with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs in animal style 1. She is particularly interested in the ambiguities of the often particularly accentuated frames. On the one hand, they structured the surfaces of these objects and enclosed the different motifs, on the other hand, these structures were broken and the demarcations they created transcended. This crossing of the boundaries transformed the objects and infused magical powers (Kristoffersen 2017).

Other examples of anthropomorphic figures in scenic representations that were contemporary or near-contemporary with the gold foil figures are the decorated helmet panels. Unlike the gold foil figures, however, all the anthropomorphic figures on the helmet panels are male. Iconographic details that are similar on the gold foils and helmet panels have been compared, for example the kaftan that

Fig. 6. Gold bracteate from Scania, Sweden, d. 91.7 mm, IK 150,1 (photo Ulf Bruxe, Historiska museet, Stockholm).

some of the figures wear (Mannering 2017, 102; cf. also Wamers in this vol.). Margrethe Watt alluded briefly to the possibility that the figures of the 'dancing group' on the gold foils represented aspects of cultic activities and may correspond to the weapon dancers on the Torslunda die (Watt 1992, 218).

Stamped plates that belonged to seven different helmets have been discovered so far in Scandinavia. They were all found in the cemeteries of Valsgärde, Vendel, and Uppsala, all Uppland. The rectangular plates were attached to the helmets, using metal racks. In addition, four cast bronze dies for the stamping of helmet panels are known from Björnhovda, Torslunda on Öland (Fig. 8). The helmets and

A

B

Fig. 7. a Gold bracteate from Gerete, Gotland, Sweden, d. 92.45 mm, IK 62,1; b detail of the frame with anthropomorphic heads, not to scale (photo Ulf Bruxe, Historiska museet, Stockholm).

Fig. 8. Dies for helmet panels from Björnhovda, Torslunda parish, Öland, Sweden (photo Historiska museet, Stockholm). Not to scale.

dies are dated between the second half of the 6th century and second half of the 7th century (Helmbrecht 2011, 316–324; Mannering 2017, 88–106). The plates were only preserved in fragments, and their reconstructions were often based on several die-identical plates that were fixed to one helmet (Arwidsson 1977, 23–24; Hauck 1978; 1981).

The scenes show recurring themes, including processions of warriors, animal tamers, fights between warriors or against wild animals, fighting horsemen, and weapon dancers (Helmbrecht 2011, 316–324; 2015). All the scenes relate in some way to fighting – be it between men or men against dangerous animals – and fit well with the protective gear to which they were attached (see Helmbrecht, Vendel Period, in this vol.).

A distinguishing feature of the depicted fighting scenes is their open-endedness. The outcomes of the combats are yet undecided. No victor is shown. Quite unanimously, the images have been interpreted as depicting religious ideas. They were probably not referring to specific gods or heroes, whose names and deeds are known from the literary tradition, but represent visual allegories epitomising prayers to the gods uttered in a crucial situation asking for victory in the battle (Beck 1964; 1968; Hauck 1978; 1981; Steuer 1987, 202). Heiko Steuer suggested that the figurative helmet panels from pre-Christian Scandinavia may have been a reaction to contemporary helmets with Christian allegorical depictions of biblical scenes. He also argued that the warrior processions or cultic performances of warrior dances may have corresponded to the offering of liturgical objects in Christian processions as they were shown on helmets from the Christian parts of Europe (Steuer 1987, 202–203).

Little attention has been paid to the framing of the images on the dies. As the preservation of the plates is poor, the state of the edges cannot always be discerned, but it is noticeable that most images

on these plates appear not to be surrounded with complete frames, as in the case of the well preserved four dies from Björnhovda, Torslunda. The depiction of the fight of a warrior against two animals had no framing at all. Only a beaded line along the lower edge is shown in the scene of an animal tamer. The warrior procession is framed only along the left hand and top edges, and along the top of the die with the weapon dancer and masked warrior, a beaded line may indicate an incomplete border. The scenes depicted on the helmets of Valsgärde 7 and 8 appear not to have been completely framed, several were partially enclosed with straight lines or beaded borders. The only plate that was completely edged with a beaded ridge is one from the helmet from Vendel 1 with an animal tamer similar, but not identical to the die from Torslunda. The almost consistently incomplete framing of these images raises the question whether the beaded or unadorned lines were in fact demarcations of the visual field or indicated the ground on or the space in which the scenes took place.

When combining these two observations about the interpretation of the representations on the helmet panels and the absence of framing devices that surrounded the images completely, it is important to avoid a circular argument. This is why any conclusions drawn from them must be hypothetical. Whilst the images on the helmet panels most probably belonged to the religious sphere, they presumably did not depict deities in their supernatural world. Most of the scenes were not surrounded by visual boundaries that segregated them from the world of the viewers. The allegorical and cultic depictions related to the adherents of the rituals.

Conclusion

When comparing the framing on the gold foil figures with interpretations and concepts derived from observations in ancient and early medieval art, some arguments can be suggested.

Firstly, there are no parallels among contemporary Scandinavian images for the interpretation of the frames on the gold foils as representing arched portals or entrances. Only on a limited number of gold foils with single figures, the frames are vaulted, none of the couples is shown under an arch. This is why the interpretation of an entrance or a portal signifying either enhancement or a liminal space seems to be unlikely. However, architectural features tend to be a common element in ancient art and in book illuminations, where they were used in depictions of deities or the metaphorical presence of the divine. Architectural elements allude to buildings like temples, shrines, or churches that were perceived as houses of the gods or sanctuaries of the Christian god. Gold foils, unlike most other finds in early medieval Scandinavia that can be connected to ritual acts, were discovered more often than not in find spots located inside buildings or in close association with these buildings. Still, it must remain very speculative to consider the possibility that the frames on the gold foils were in some ways self-referential, hinting at the exceptional buildings in which they had been ritually deposited.

Secondly, the frames – either indicating a sacred building or operating as notional features that created and defined separate spaces for the figures in the images – may relate to concepts of divine or supernatural spheres. The deities represented on the gold bracteates were nearly always surrounded by one or more frames that detached the images visually from their surroundings and placed them in a different realm. Similarly, the mythical beings that were depicted in the animal styles were put into confined spaces by various framing devices that alluded to their otherworldliness.

Thirdly, the distinction between framed and unframed gold foil figures is probably a real difference. Watt and Mannering have put forward the possibility that despite their uniformity in size, material, and production, different gold foils may have been perceived and used in very different ways (Watt 2009, 50; Mannering 2017, 26). The framed figures shown in their ceremonial dress may have represented deities that were in demarcated spaces, separated from the world around them, whereas the unframed figures that were depicted moving, gesturing, and possibly dancing may be describing

participants in ritual performances during religious ceremonies comparable with the usually also unframed figures on the helmet panels that are shown in warrior processions and dances, or in visual allegories of supplications to the gods.

Finally, whilst the frames impacted the figures that were represented by confining their spaces and taking them out of their surroundings, the frames also affected the viewers by mediating the encounter with the images. As the discussion of the frames in Anglo-Saxon manuscript illuminations showed, the different framing devices directed the gaze and controlled the experience of a numinous world. Through the allusions that the frames implied, the viewers were invited to appreciate additional layers of meaning when seeing the images.

If these interpretations are accurate, the framed gold foil figures were perceived as visualization of a divine world, whereas the unframed figures represented participants in ceremonial performances that were addressed to the deities. Finding them always together may point to an idea of a union between participants and deities that was reached during religious rituals.

Appendix: Framed and unframed gold foil figures

In this survey, the framed and unframed gold foils are listed according to their find places. Few precise numbers are stated because there is not yet a complete gold foil figure catalogue available. Recent overviews of finds have been provided by Watt (1992; 2004), Lamm (2004), Helmbrecht (2011), and Mannering (2017).

Denmark

By far the largest find assemblage with more than 2500 gold foils, which constitutes about 85 % of all known foils, has been discovered in the central part of a large settlement complex in Sorte Muld, close to the east coast of the island of Bornholm. The finds may have been related to a building (Watt 2009). Only about 13 foils show a couple. These are all surrounded with either a beaded or, in a few instances, a simple, unadorned square or rectangular frame. Among the single figures, the male ones outnumber the female ones considerably. Both male and female figures are depicted in rectangular or vaulted frames or without frames (Watt 1992). Only in Sorte Muld a few zoomorphic foils have been discovered together with the anthropomorphic ones. They are always cut-outs and unframed. Among the finds, several single and double foils are linked by die-identity to finds from the central place in Uppåkra in Scania and to finds in Lundeborg on the island of Funen (Watt 2004, 214–215). They are always framed foils.

In seven other locations on Bornholm gold foils have been found. They follow a pattern similar to that observed in Sorte Muld with predominantly single male and a few female figures, some framed, some unframed. A number of old finds now in the Museum in Rønne originated probably from the large settlement area in Smørenge and were included in von Melle's publication in 1725 (Laursen 2014). They were all single figures, some stamped and framed, most of them unframed and either stamped or cut-outs with similar characteristics to the Sorte Muld finds that were depicted moving and with often large hands that are gesturing demonstratively.

Further discoveries in Denmark include single finds with either a male or female figure in various places in Jutland, including Nørre Hvam, Stentinget, and Tørring (Mannering 2017, 19–20). Eight gold foils that were discovered in Toftegård on Zealand include six couples framed with beaded surrounds and two single unframed die-identical figures, probably males holding in one hand the wrist of the other arm. Several foils had been found in a post-hole belonging to a hall building, others in the plough-soil (Tornbjerg 1998). Watt identified die-links of foils with couples with finds from Uppåkra and from Lundeborg (Watt 2004, 215).

On the island of Funen, two find spots of gold foils are known. Two foils were found in Gudme, including one couple in a simple frame and a single female figure with faint traces of a frame on a foil that may have been too small for the die. Both finds were probably linked to a hall building (Thrane 1999, 145). Over 100 gold foils originated from Lundeborg that has been identified by its rich archaeological finds as a harbour and a seasonal market place on the beach. The foils were found in the centre of the settlement in close proximity (Thomsen 1993, 87–88). In contrast to the find assemblage from Sorte Muld, only one foil was a single cut-out figure, and all the other foils depict couples in beaded frames. Die-links connected several foils with finds from Toftegården, Uppåkra, and Sorte Muld (Watt 2004, 215).

Norway

A collection of foils is now in the Danish National Museum. They comprise mainly framed couples. Their provenance is unknown, but a die-link with two finds from Hauge, Rogaland, suggests that some may originate from Norway (Axboe 1981; Mannering 2017, 29).

The iconography of the nearly 80 gold foils from nine Norwegian find spots is far more uniform. With the exception of two cut-out single male figures from Kirkeseter in Sør-Trøndelag, all finds depict couples surrounded by beaded frames (Mannering 2017, 39–40; McGraw 2017). Foils from other sites were associated with ceremonial or cult buildings, including the finds from Mære, Nord-Trøndelag, Borg, Nordland, and possibly Hov, Oppland (Sundqvist 2016, 411–412).

Sweden

In Sweden, more than 280 gold foils are now known from 14 find places. The largest collection with more than 120 foils and five patrices has been discovered during the excavation of a large cult building in a central part of the settlement in Uppåkra. Most of the foils were found in the fill of large postholes and wall trenches belonging to this house (Watt 2004). The composition of the assemblage is similar to the one from Sorte Muld with only six couples and the majority featuring single males. There are also a few single females and several undesignated single foils, including framed as well as unframed foils. The connection between both sites is also apparent through several die-links. There are, however, some subtle differences. Four of the couples are unframed, which is unusual. One of the framed couples belongs to a die-family that is also represented among the finds from Toftegård and Lundeborg (Watt 2004, 195). Equally, the single die-linked figures are always framed. Unlike the finds from Sorte Muld, few foils in Uppåkra were deliberately folded or rolled (Watt 2004, 170).

In many Swedish find places only one, two, or three foils have been discovered, mostly framed couples. In Svintuna, Östergötland, Eskilstuna, Södermanland, and Husby, Närke, the foils were found in connection with halls or manorial buildings (Lamm 2004; Sundqvist 2016, 408–409). Others have been discovered in graves, like the two single male figures from Bolmsö, Småland, and the fragment of a couple in Ulltuna, Uppland (Lamm 2004, 62–63; 65).

From Helgö, Uppland, 26 gold foils, all depicting couples in simple frames, were found in a central building complex, the so-called building group 2, mostly in the foundation (Lamm 2004, 50–56). Whilst there are no die-links to foils from other sites, there are almost identical finds from Slöinge and Eskiltuna (Lamm 2004, 70–71).

The large find from Slöinge in Halland comprised 63 foils, of which the majority, 43, are couples. It is noticeable that about a third are not framed, the other are surrounded with a plain border (Lamm 2004, 71–75). Among the single male and female foils are framed and unframed ones. The foils have been discovered in the central area of the settlement, most of them in a post-hole belonging to a roof-bearing post of a hall building, house 3, and a few more in a similar post-hole in another hall building, house 2.

In Eketorp, 15 gold foils showing single figures from three different stamps have been found in a hoard inside the walls of the ring-fort. Nine foils depicting males with long hair in two different sizes are unframed. The larger ones are shown on tiptoe, the smaller ones walking. They closely resemble foils found in Sorte Muld and Uppåkra, whereas the six foils of a framed seated female depiction from the third stamp has also parallels in Sorte Muld and in Slöinge (Lamm 2004, 66).

As recently as 2013 and 2017, 43 gold foils were discovered in the settlement site of Västra Vång in Blekinge, not far from the coast of the Baltic sea. All but one of them depict single figures, both female and male ones, including stamped ones and several cut-outs. Most of the figures were unframed. Two of the framed figures are die-linked with the female single figure from Eketorp on Öland, and a framed male single figure has a die-link to Sorte Muld (195) on Bornholm (Henriksson et al. 2016; Henriksson/Nilsson 2016).

This brief overview detailing the composition of the find assemblages of framed and unframed gold foil figures shows that there are no unambiguous correlations between framing devices, iconographic patterns, or find spots. There are some regional trends and some iconographic correspondences that appear to be significant.

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